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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 000078

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/04/2016

TAGS: PREL PTER CO

SUBJECT: FRENCH AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES FARC REJECTION OF
HOSTAGE EXCHANGE

REF: BOGOTA 00065

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood.
Reason 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) On January 1 the FARC announced that it would not deal with the Uribe Government on the French-Swiss-Spanish humanitarian accord initiative (reftel). In response, on January 3, Uribe characterized the FARC as "not just thieves and kidnappers, but loud-mouthed clowns." That day, Ambassador discussed with French Ambassador Camille Rohou the current state of the European initiative.

¶2. (C) Rohou was unhappy with all players. He said that the Europeans had been surprised by the government's public acceptance of their proposal in December, which he claimed reduced the chances of the FARC's responding positively from low to almost nil. At the same time, he was unhappy that the FARC had replied in such strong terms, dismissing any chance of working with Uribe and prompting the strong Uribe reply, which only made matters worse. He said that, "the FARC is playing election politics."

¶3. (C) Nevertheless Rohou also saw continued possibilities, although probably not right away. He said that the FARC's statement left the door open to further talks with the Europeans. Other FARC statements that they were unfamiliar with the details of the European proposal were patently untrue; they had known all about it and it was on everyone's website. He suggested that this ploy also helped the FARC invite a return of the facilitators, to discuss the details. He also speculated that the FARC might still be thinking of releasing a few of their 63 hostages in the short term, and that their harsh response had been a prelude to such a softening gesture. Or, at least, he hoped for proof of life for Ingrid Betancourt.

¶4. (C) But he clearly believes that no break through is in the offing until after the presidential elections. In response to a question about the French Foreign Minister's declaration that he would come to Colombia "soon" to discuss the matter, Rohou said now was the wrong time and he did not think the minister would come for a while. There was nothing for him to say to the government and he could not meet with the FARC (Rohou did not respond to probing about possible meetings with FARC go-betweens). Nor would he say if the French "facilitator" would be returning soon to Colombia. Rohou said that the French could not do anything not coordinated with their Swiss and Spanish partners; the three would be meeting soon in Europe to hash it out.

¶5. (C) Rohou speculated about tensions within the FARC Secretariat. He agreed that, unless there was a softening gesture later, the harsh FARC response clearly signaled a victory for Raul Reyes' tough line, perhaps abetted by brother hard-liner Mono Jojoy, against Alfonso Cano. He noted that in the past the "important" hostages had been held by Fabian Ramirez, but now they were in the hands of Cano, which must indicate some sort of ascendancy, and probably within a few hours of the El Retiro site where the humanitarian accord talks were to take place.

¶ 6. (C) Rohou asked the U.S. position. The ambassador explained that we would not negotiate with terrorists, nor encourage others to do so. Nor, however, would we stand in the way if the Colombian government wanted to begin talks, with the clear implication that in our view the decision was up to the Colombians, not the Europeans. Rohou also pressed for assurances that the U.S. would not support a rescue operation; the ambassador said that we would not take the option off the table.

¶ 7. (C) Finally, Rohou spoke of French fatigue over the Ingrid Betancourt issue. He noted that, for the first time in years, President Chirac did not mention Betancourt in his New Year's message. Also the French people were losing interest in demonstrations to free Betancourt that did not have any effect. He suggested that one important point for the FARC is that their assets are losing value, as the international community loses patience with them.

¶ 8. (C) Comment. In the past, Rohou has complained that the Betancourt issue, and therefore all of French policy toward Colombia, is run directly by his predecessor, Daniel Parfait, and by PM Villepan. He has confessed that they don't always keep him in the loop. Nevertheless, as a known supporter of humanitarian exchange and of dealings with the FARC, he often has access to contacts we do not.

WOOD